

1995: The JJ Foods Strike

On October 31st 95, forty five workers at JJ Fast Food Distribution Ltd. in Tottenham were sacked for joining the T&G.

JJ FOODS STRIKE

The conditions at the plant were appalling; workers were putting in 60-70 hours per week for a pittance with no overtime, sick or holiday pay. Drivers were expected to pay for any parking fines or counterfeit money they were given out of their own pockets. The sacked workers immediately gathered outside the factory to form a picket and were attacked by hired thugs wielding sticks and knives. Three workers were hospitalised. Support was called for and daily pickets began to take place at dawn outside the factory. Strikers were joined by supporters from the Colin Roach Centre, Haringey Solidarity Group and various Trot organisations. Pickets were heavily policed and the TSG were present in large numbers. Pickets were confined behind police barricades across the road and on a hill above the pavement, as far from the scabs as possible. Anyone trying to picket the actual goods entrance was immediately threatened with arrest. A support group was set up, and a strike bulletin produced. The heavy presence of SWP and other trot groups began to wane after the first three weeks as the strikers made it clear that they didn't want their fight turned into a glorified paper sales pitch, and the support group was left in the hands of the strikers, Haringey Solidarity Group and the Colin Roach Centre.

The official union also pulled out, as they wanted pickets in the afternoons (completely ineffective as all the workers are out on deliveries after 8am) on the grounds that dawn pickets were dangerous due to the lack of light!

The support group also decided to picket JJ Foods outlets; the chain of Jenny's Burger restaurants being the main target. Jenny's is a franchise of JJ Foods and pickets were organised at a different branch each week. These were largely successful, pickets gaining surprising support from workers and even managers who were shocked by the actions of JJ's and who promised to complain to Mustafa Kamil, JJ's boss.

Support within the Kurdish and Turkish communities grew and by December Kamil was feeling the pressure and agreed to enter into negotiations with the workers.

The pickets were called off on the 11th, 12th and 13th December as a goodwill gesture while talks with ACAS took place.

Kamil turned up on the first day, saying he was happy to negotiate, but that his life was under threat, muttering stuff about the PKK. He had body guards with him and was wearing a bullet proof jacket! On the second day, he returned and met 40 demonstrators outside the talks. He demanded police protection and disappeared with the police.

A Union official went to the police station and managed to talk to him: he stated he was happy to re-employ the majority of sacked workers but that he wanted to go legit and would need the NI numbers of all workers. He said he wouldn't continue to employ the scab labour as they were "no good". However he would not take back the most active of the strikers, who just happened to be Kurdish; all those he was proposing to re-employ were Turkish.

Obviously this was not acceptable and the strikers are holding out for the reinstatement of all sacked workers, as well as their other demands; all workers to have contracts and be in the union; holiday pay; sick pay; no money to be paid by drivers out of their own pockets; two shifts to be introduced in the freezers where the temperature is -30 degrees.

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Meanwhile, the strikers have been continuing to picket and have been involved in solidarity work with the Liverpool Dockers, and Hillingdon Strikers. They have met with Southwark Labour Group to demand that the Education Authority cease to trade with JJs, and lobbied Enfield Education Authority.

The strikers all won their industrial tribunals in January and were found to have been unfairly dismissed. Compensation will have to be paid by Kamil, who is likely to be made bankrupt by the decision (unless he transfers his assets to Jennys burgers chain, which has been rumoured). Trade has been very slow during the strike, many scabs have left, unable to cope with the pressure of being picketed day in and day out. Delivery vans are leaving the plant half empty, and the company has been shunned by the local Turkish and Kurdish communities.

[b]New workers support group[/b]

The strike has been largely successful against very heavy odds, and has forged links between activists from Haringey Solidarity Group, CRC and anarchist groups with Kurdish and Turkish workers and activists. Workers have agreed to put the compensation payments into a permanent workers support group for fast food and other low paid workers in the Tottenham area. Haringey Solidarity Group will be offering practical support to get the group going.

Contact JJ Foods Locked Out workers Support Group, c/o Unwaged Centre, 72 West Green Road, London N15 5NS, Tel

0181 802 9804

[i]This article came from Black Flag #207, Jan 1995, which also featured a picture of the JJ

workers on the front cover. In the end some of the workers accepted a settlement from the owner but most, particularly the most militant, did not return there.[/i]